

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 46 - Tips

I'd tied myself to him. In my quest for revenge, I'd done the very thing I had set out not to do. And now I could not get out. Wasn't even sure I wished to. Not when the mere thought of him made me feel things. Deep in the crevices of my soul, I longed for him to stir my very essence. I longed to surrender to him.

"Your tea is getting cold, child." It was by no means a scolding, but I jolted all the same when Liira spoke beside me. "Do you wish to talk about it?"

"Forgive me, my lady, but talk about what exactly." I stared at Liira, feeling a little confused.

"Whatever it is that has been the object of your obsession."

Obsession? I could hardly call it that. Perhaps intrigue or curiosity. Two things that I would never have thought would be the result of my dreaded encounter with my mate.

After barely being able to keep our paths from crossing, I'd been awakened by his ferocious growl. Even when sleep still assaulted me, the anger in the sound that erupted from deep his throat had stirred my wolf and I had wished to fly the few doors down to check on him. But then he'd appeared right in my chambers, eyes glittering a fiery gold that sent me bowing in an attempt to escape his piercing gaze.

"Please rise." He'd said. So softly I would have missed it had it not been accompanied by his own clear actions to help me with the task. "Do not bow to me, ever. Such is reserved for my servants and subjects. You are neither of those things." He'd said next, his tone more stern than soft and I'd only nodded. That had seemed to pacify him, if the ghost of a smile to grace his face after my little nod was anything to go by. I'd hoped for it to grow into one of those easy smiles I knew he possessed, but his expression had morphed into something else I did not recognize. And as he led me back to my bed, my heart had hammered furiously in my chest. Thoughts of what might happen at the end of that short journey to the piece of grand furniture had left me feeling uneasy. Having him help me get comfortable on the large soft bed had done nothing to ease the hammering either. If anything, it made it worse the longer he worked at such a mundane thing with the utmost care I had witnessed from him yet. And by the time he was done, hammering was not the only thing my heart was doing.

When his warm hands had rested on my cheeks, cupping them gently, my eyes had fluttered closed in anticipation of what was to come again. What came however, was as much a surprise to me as it was to him.

“How are you?” Of all the things I had expected it was not that. The most mundane set of words that had my eyes widening in surprise.

He’d merely sat back and laughed at my reaction. A hearty laugh that had wrapped me in untold warmth and unearthed a strange desire in me. That desire had been partly fulfilled by the longest conversation my mate and I had shared for the rest of the night.

“How was his majesty’s childhood like?”

“Elian?” Liira studied me as if shocked that that question had proceeded out of my mouth. I couldn’t blame her however, as it had caught me by surprise too. I had had no intention to ask so openly.

“I’m curious.” I answered Liira’s unspoken part of her question honestly. Having awakened to an empty but warm space beside me and to the most beautiful memories of a real conversation, a part of me wished to know more.

“That is one strange request.”

“Strange?”

“I mean, many only care about knowing how much gold in the royal vaults belongs to him.” Liira reached for my cup of tea. “I’ll take that.”

“I do not think I would know what to do with so much gold.” I let out a chuckle.

“And that just adds to how special you are for him. Now come over here and lie down so I can check on my other grandson.”

Special. My belly fluttered as I lay down and let Liira do what she needed to.

“Speaking of satisfying your curiosity, I prefer showing you than narrating.”

“Oh?”

“This is something I think you will appreciate more than my old crackly voice boring you to death with tales of your mate.” Old and crackly were not the

words I would use to describe Liira's voice, but in my time here I'd learnt that it was unwise to question the matriarch on such matters.

"Thank you." Tucking that away, my gaze shifted to my belly. I was beginning to show and somehow that had made the child I carried more real each day.

"I'm afraid I will have to ask lord quent to do a weekly fitting from now on and I might have to rethink those upcoming lessons." Liira scribbled something on a parchment, her expression thoughtful.

Alarmed by the matriarch's demeanour, I shot up to a sitting position. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, gods no, child." Liira cupped my cheeks. "Everything is perfectly fine. You are both doing fine."

"But lord Quent..." I did not even know who that was, but knowing I would be seeing him weekly made me feel uneasy. Not to mention Liira's own change of heart regarding the lessons she'd insisted I needed to undergo now that I was to be by my mate's side.

"Quent is nothing but the designer charged with creating your sacred gown for the banquet."

"What banquet?" I frowned at Liira. I had not been invited to any banquet. Neither had I heard of any. None that would need me dressed in something sacred either. Whatever a sacred gown was meant to be.

"The banquet to welcome the child you carry of course. Hasn't he told you of it?"

"Perhaps he has not had an opportunity to do so." I did not know why I defended him.

"Oh?" Liira arched a brow.

"I have seen little of him." I answered sheepishly, knowing the reason why.

"Still playing cat and mouse I see."

"We are most certainly not."

Liira scoffed. "You should know very little escapes my attention around here. But that matters less, such is expected of young love."

Love? I sought to dismiss the very idea as just Liira's rumblings, but the fluttering of my heart and the warmth that spread in it roused questions. Those I did not wish to face...yet.

"But why would he do this? Isn't Myrna and her child more suited for it?"

"Child, have you not been paying attention?" Liira's eyes narrowed.

"To what exactly?" I avoided the matriarch's gaze, a familiar tightness forming around my heart. It loosened a fraction when warm hands cupped my cheeks once more.

"Shyla..." Liira's eyes were no longer narrowed. They were instead wide and at the same time filled with an emotion that spoke of something I did not know but should have known. I couldn't bring myself to ask what that was. Not knowing seemed to appeal to me more. "Perhaps it's time I satisfied your curiosity. Why don't you cover up and come with me."

If there was one thing I appreciated about Liira it was that she knew when to stop. And as she led me to wherever the satisfying of my curiosity was meant to happen, she dived into conversation that was miles away from whatever had been raised back in my chambers.

"Looking at him now, one would never think my grandson was once such an adorable child."

I could. After last night's unbidden conversation that had laid bare a side of him I'd not known, I knew I could. A guard unlocked and swung open two huge doors leading to a large room that suited the size of the wooden doors meant to guard it. The darkness beyond the doors had me turning to Liira.

"Where are we?" Liira only grabbed onto my hand and stepped in. The room flooded with light with each step we took and for a moment I thought it was magic. Just until I noticed more guards drawing back long drapes of dark curtains.

"Probably one of my favourite rooms in the entire palace." Liira's tone turned dreamy and following her gaze, I discovered why. "Here lives generations upon generations of the royals of Xatis."

I let Liira's hand go and floated deeper into the room, mesmerized by the amazing display of art. Potraits upon portraits of kings and queens standing beside their wolves, all the while appearing timeless. No introductions were necessary or perhaps I did not wish to have my show interrupted.

"But perhaps, this is what you are looking for." Liira pointed to a group of portraits that held an oddly familiar face. One look and I instantly knew why Liira had opted to show me. I drew closer, a smile splitting my lips with each step. He was definitely adorable. With a crown of unruly hair the young prince tugged at my heart.

In the first portrait an obvious frown spoke of one little boy that had been forced to stay still while the artist struggled to capture his image. He was sharply dressed in a small version of his current royal robes. In another portrait he seemed totally oblivious of the one who'd captured him. The little boy's attention was completely taken by something at his feet. In another he seemed to be tugging at his mother's gown, an unhappy expression pasted on his little face while Sarabeth remained poised. "He really did hate portraits, didn't he?" I let out a chuckle while my heart warmed at the sight.

"Why are you intent on embarrassing me, grandmother?"

Annoyance laced my mate's tone and when I turned to face him and spotted a familiar unhappy expression I couldn't hold the laughter.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 47 - Tips

"I can't believe you insist on being on your feet after what just happened."

"I refuse to give anyone any satisfaction of seeing me wallow in my bed." I argued, earning myself a look of disapproval from my best friend which I dismissed in favour of a more comforting sight.

Staring at my mate, I decided I would never tire of the sound of her laughter. Despite being the object of it, a warmth spread in my heart. Seeing Shyla display genuine emotion and a care free side that I knew had nothing to do with our bond was like a breath of fresh air. More so after a night spent together without expectations. I was not even aware that there was anything to be enjoyed about anything of the sort.

Determined to keep that happy expression on her lovely face, I pulled up my clock, covering Myrna's mark that I still bore on my neck, together with a recently acquired one before stepping in.

"Glad to see that my discomfort amuses you so."

"You have to forgive m-" Her laughter died down and she closed the distance between us in panic. "You are hurt."

It was nothing but the bond speaking. She was meant to care if I was hurt. I knew that and yet I couldn't help reading into it more than I should have. "It's nothing." It wasn't, but I did not wish to worry her. "Nothing but a scratch."

"A scratch should have healed by now." Lines of worry formed on her beautiful face and I couldn't have that.

"And it is doing just that." I ignored the pain that shot up were she'd held me and drew her attention back to the many portraits. "Do you have favourites so far?" When I was met with silence, I turned to her. A frown had distorted her lovely features.

"It's not as if she has a lot of options." A grinning Liira came and stood close, her distraction more than welcome.

"I thought you said I was adorable?" I scoffed.

"I'm your grandmother. I'm supposed to say such things."

I rolled my eyes at Liira before turning to my mate who was still less than amused. "There is someone I wish for you to meet." A figure appeared by the doors after I'd mind linked them to come in.

"Carlytte?"

"Oh, my lady! It is so good to see you again!" The bubbly maiden shot for my mate and took her in a good old fashioned embrace before she realized how improper her behavior was for someone like her. Face filled with colour, she bowed impossibly low. "Please forgive me, my lady, your majesty."

"There is really nothing to forgive." Shyla returned the embrace, much to the young maiden's delight. And if I had reservations about Evarius' niece being

good for my mate, the bright smiles that were exchanged between them changed that.

“I have appointed Carlytte as your lady in waiting.”

“You mean she’ll be my staff?” A displeased look graced my mate’s face and before I could find a fitting answer to her displeasure, Carlytte came to my rescue.

“Titles are overrated. We could just be friends. Please say yes. You know I have wanted this since the moment I laid my eyes on you.” The whole thing was like a bizarre proposal, but it did get my mate nodding and smiling regardless.

“Well, now that that is settled, you ladies will have to excuse us. I’d like a word with my grandson.” I stiffened, knowing what was coming next.

“Watch over her.” I mouthed to Rakon as me, Liira and Gol stepped into the inner chamber of the royal gallery.

“Where is Sarabeth and Derian?” Liira asked the moment I closed the doors and trapped us in the little sanctuary that was meant to keep everything spoken here secret.

“Hopefully father and mother are busy somewhere having tea.”

“Elian?!” Liira warned. “You know we cannot be in here without those two. It’s tradition.”

“Technically this is not official. You are here to embarrass me with those baby portraits aren’t you?”

“They will still see through it.”

“This is the safest place for what we are about to speak of.” My eyes darted to Gol. “A spy inside the palace speaks of no place being safe.”

Liira only sighed, knowing I spoke the truth. “Let me see what they did to you.”

I undid my cloak carefully before taking it off. Up until the moment I’d stepped out of Shyla’s chambers to get a breath of fresh air, the palace and its surroundings had not been a place one needed to keep looking over their

shoulders constantly. Not until something hot and sharp had been plunged deep inside my neck while I stared into the early morning darkness.

“By the gods!” Liira jumped to inspect the wounds I was nursing under my coat just as I suspected she would. I did not miss Gol’s reaction either. The outlaw’s eyes widened before pure hatred painted his face and his fists clutched tightly at his sides.

“It looks worse than it actually feels.” I flinched when Liira applied pressure to my neck. “The royal physician did all he could.”

“Of course he did.” Frustration ate at Liira. “Why in god’s name did you not come to me sooner?” She struggled to keep from yelling as she reached for vile after vile from her little pouch, dubbing a little of each on the deep cut on my neck. “Damn it! None of this works! Why did you not say anything?!”

“Because while I struggled with whoever had dared to attack me, I aquired this.” I placed a piece of armor on the table before us.

“The emblem of Carene?” Gol grabbed at the piece, recognition and shock registering in his eyes. “Why in God’s name would anyone from Carene dare attack the king of Xatis in his own palace and that in the open?”

“That is what I wish to know.” I gave the man a hard stare that he held with one of his own. He was one of the reasons I’d chosen to keep the attack quiet. Somehow after learning about him from Liira, I knew that the man with roots in Carene would be an easy target for the blame. That in turn would affect Shyla and I couldn’t have that either.

“You think I’m involved in this?” He asked through gritted teeth. “Is that the reason you let me into this forbidden chamber? To force a confession out of me?”

“Of course not. We know you have not been back in Carene since the fall of the noble house of Alde.”

Anger, sorrow, hate and every emotion meant to express deep seated grief flashed across the outlaw’s face before his huge body sunk in the seat that was behind him. It pained me to have to ask him for anything, but it couldn’t be helped.

"I need your help." A pained gaze met mine. "Any bit would be appreciated." I added, but he merely waved me away.

"I knew fate was meddling, the moment she washed up on the banks of the devil's river." A bitter laugh escaped the outlaw's lips, but that was not the thing to grab my attention and I hoped to the gods he did not mean who I thought he did. My hopes were shattered with his next words. "A poor maiden, bearing a very precious ring should have had me running the other way and yet here I am."

Something stabbed in my chest. "The devil's river?" My voice was barely a whisper as thoughts of Shyla being tossed about in the blood thirsty body of water assaulted me. There was no end to how much I'd hurt her.

"She was perfectly fine, given what she had endured. That alone should have made me think twice about getting involved, but no one ever turns down second chances. Definitely not a man who'd hoped and prayed for one."

Suddenly waiting until my heir's banquet to strip Myrna of her position seemed too far "Is she a part of it?" Anger burned, but Gol merely laughed.

"If you think you'll find a connection between these people and your queen, you are mistaken."

"You mean Myrna knows nothing?"

"That is not entirely true. She does and she doesn't. One does not get a hold of such a sophisticated spell without some help...some serious dark help." Gol nodded at the mark on my neck. "I would not be surprised to discover that she'd have met them way before she set foot in your palace."

I turned to Liira. My grandmother had that calculative glint in her eyes. "Will you help us?"

"I will."

"Oh, thank the gods."

"In return for something."

"It's nice to know you are human after all." Liira sat back, all ears.

"Revenge."

I sprang up to my feet. "You wish for Xatis to wage war against Carene?"

Gol stood to his full height too, but his stance was in no way meant to intimidate. "That is where you are mistaken, your majesty. War has already been waged."

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 48 - Tips

Something was wrong. Even when no one was saying anything, I could feel it. I could see it too. Guards around Liira's side of the castle had more than doubled. Hallways were littered with guards in armor at every turn. Their postures were ever alert. Gazes, scrutinizing. Hands resting on their weapons, ready to be drawn at the slightest sign of an attack.

From my chamber's window, figures kept disappearing into the forest every so often, while a number of them emerged. It wouldn't take a military man to figure out that the patrols around the palace had intensified.

And apart from Carlytte, two new maidens trailed me everywhere I went. Samara and Norae were always dressed in typical maid's dresses and assumed the acceptable humble posture, but they were anything but. At least not according to my thoughts. They'd been brought as new additions to the number of maids Liira insisted I needed, but one look at the two maidens revealed a number of qualities that were odd for a typical maid. The greatest being their insane ability to put themselves between me and any other figure that would find themselves too close while I took a stroll in the hallways or palace grounds. Many times I did not even notice the figures approaching and yet none had ever escaped those two's attention. It had led me to conclude that my two maids had to be warriors. I however did not understand why I would need so much protection, but according to Astryn's assumptions, I needed to be protected upclose and Gol being a man would not just do as I was the king's mate. I found the whole thing ludicrous but Liira would not let it go.

If that did not speak of trouble, then my own mate's continual absence was clear evidence of what I presumed. I had not laid my eyes on him since the royal gallery. The study he'd occupied down the hall had remained locked and unused. The sheets on my bed hadn't had any traces of his scent at they would before. A clear sign that even those late night visits whose knowledge I had accidentally stumbled upon had totally ceased. It was as if he'd fallen off the face of the realm.

I sucked in a breath and let it all out to keep myself from thinking too much of the situation. Apparently getting myself worked up even on the littlest of things was not good in my state. Except his absence was nothing little. And no matter how much I willed my stupid heart not to think about him, it somehow found its way to doing just that. Hoping he would show up any moment and declare that all was well. That he was well.

But that was not to be had, not yet anyway. So I'd decided to spend my days distracted with anything that came close enough to drowning my own longing for him.

As Liira had said, Lord Quent, who I had learned was the lord of the noble house, had visited me week after week. He'd worked with his seamstresses at carefully taking my new measurements while mumbling amongst themselves about how quickly my belly was growing. They had tried to guess how big I would be by the following week, but it turned out to be useless. The heir I carried seemed to enjoy everyone's guesses, except me of course. Or perhaps it was because I spent the most part of my day caressing my belly, making me aware of just how big I had become. I did not need a mirror to confirm it either. As I spent long moments staring at my bulging belly. Turning this way and that way while having conversations that I was sure made little sense to the child I carried.

"You are glowing." Carlytte beamed as she came into my garden. Yes, I did get my own private garden at Liira's insistence. And even though I had fought her over it initially, I found that it was really soothing to spend so much time in here. Away from everyone else who insisted on treating me like the royalty I wasn't. And as long as I could forget that Samara and Norae were ever by my side.

"You mean I'm getting fat." I pouted.

"Well, that too." One could count on Carlytte to be brutally honest in that regard. Coupled with Astryn and one could get all the honesty they needed in an entire lifetime. "But I would say your glow is really outshining everything else."

"Of course you would." I scoffed as I reached for the cup of tea she offered me.

"Liira guarantees this will do wonders for your aching back." I had been getting a lot those and Liira was always finding ways to ease my discomfort. She'd

attributed them to my rapidly growing belly. A matter that had the matriarch beaming with pride.

"Does she now?" I sipped and loved the taste. "Why can't she let me in on what is going on around me while she's at it?" Sounding bitter had not been my intention.

Carlytte made a show of scanning my surroundings. "Whichever world do you mean?"

"I'm not blind, Carlytte." I mumbled unhappily.

The maiden only stared at me thoughtfully. "Even then, I have been charged with keeping you and the heir happy, safe and calm."

"So there is trouble then? And will you stop referring to my child as the heir?" Even when I knew my child would soon cease being a bastard, the reminder still left me feeling uneasy.

"Firstly, I said nothing of trouble anywhere. And as for the young prince or princess what do you suggest I refer her or him as, hmmm?"

A tightness formed around my heart, reminding me of the circumstances that seemed not to dim. Naturally I thought this was the part me and my mate should decide on a name, but I hadn't seen him for too long. "I do not know. What are the royal traditions regarding names?"

Carlytte blushed. "Traditions were never my strong point."

"What noble lady is not interested in learning about her kingdom's traditions?"

"Me, apparently. How was the fitting?" The distraction was a clear sign that she did not wish to talk about that particular topic anymore. It was something I had come to know about Carlytte. While she was bubbly most of the times, she had her moments when the cruelty of life seemed to sneak up on her. And in those times she preferred not to indulge.

"Perhaps if there was anything to fit at all, it would make this ordeal more bearable." I sighed, earning myself a smile.

"I'm afraid you will have to be extremely patient on that. Not only is the banquet something more than just an event meant to celebrate an heir being

conceived, Lord Quent will make sure to take his time. With his noble house's reputation he will have to ensure your sacred gown is all perfection."

"I need to go out." I suddenly declared. "All this talk about dos and don'ts will eventually drive me insane." That was the truth. For someone who'd been used to living free as bird in the forgotten village, doing literally nothing was proving to be a pain. Besides, I could swear even my child was just as bored.

"Uh—" Carlytte's eyes darted between me and the maidens behind me.

"Do not dare stop me." I warned.

"Of course not. Why would we?" Whatever Samara and Norae's answer had been, it was not what had been their first thought. Neither was it for Carlytte, but the three maidens joined me anyway as I walked out of the garden.

Gol straightened up when we all emerged. A smile brightened his features, but it was not enough to completely hide the worry lines. Back at the shack, I would have insisted on him telling me what ailed him and he would have insisted it was nothing. The back and forth would have eventually drawn a smile and erased the lines. I found myself missing that and regretting that I couldn't do it now.

"My lady?" He looked at me askance and I merely smiled and pointed towards the way leading to the world outside the palace.

The sun was bright, its kisses warm and there was nothing better for my longing soul. I sighed in contentment. "This is absolutely beautiful."

"Indeed." Carlytte agreed beside me. "One does tend to forget such pleasures once they enter—"

"Carlytte, how can you be so shameless? Turning your back on your family and associating with the enemy." The serene atmosphere received an unwelcome individual. The familiar redhead was fuming. Kerina, I decided, was a sad and lonely soul. Why that was I had no interest in discovering. Shifting my gaze, it landed on my sister who had an indecipherable expression on. Beautiful as ever, regardless. I refused to acknowledge her and instead turned to the other fuming maiden.

"Unlike you, Kerina, I am glad to serve the king of Xatis and if I were you I would be careful as to whom I refer to as the enemy." Carlytte all but spat.

“Well, you are not me and I do not see his majesty anywhere around here.” The proud maiden scoffed.

“I do not blame you. You were always blind. I just hope the future queen of Xatis and the heir will be as forgiving of your insults and mistakes.”

I gaped at Carlytte. She was making threats that had not even crossed my mind. I was not even sure I wished to be a queen. To get back at my sister yes, but to be queen? That was— I did not know what that was.

“Come, my lady.” Carlytte finally tugged on my arm and I was about to follow, but another sharp voice kept me from doing so.

“When did you get your wolf?” Myrna had stepped forward. Apparently she couldn’t help herself or perhaps her anger had been stirred by Carlytte’s words. But then none of that was as surprising as her question.

Samara, Norae and Gol stepped forward too, ready to protect, but I held my hand up to stop them. I had no intentions of making Myrna think I was in any way intimidated by her. My wolf also made certain to relay that fact as she pushed forward.

I arched a brow. “Why do you care?” Desperation flashed in her eyes before her gaze dropped to my belly. Hands clenched by her sides, she studied it furiously.

The sight would have been satisfying if not for my own surprising realization that hit me. Mouth dry, it was my turn to study her. There was something about her...about me. A pressing matter I needed answers to.

When she found my gaze again I couldn’t put her facial expression into words, neither could I put my thoughts into words. Not in front of her.

“This is not yet over!” For the second time Myrna walked away from me, furious, but none of that mattered as much as the discovery I’d made. It was something that had never crossed my mind, until now.

“Gol? Myrna is my sister right?” My guard merely stared at me confused. So I rephrased my question.

“Would my own hate for her or the fact that my own family were nowhere to walk me the path when I shifted make me not recognize her wolf?” I knew that

I would recognise my family's scent but until now I realized, I had experienced nothing of the sort.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 49 - Tips

There are many reasons why one would not feel their connection to their own family, Shyla. Liira had kept insisting, but no matter how much she did that, for me, those many reasons only came down to two.

It was either I was indeed my father and mother's child or I wasn't. And I had never before wished for two conflicting statements to be true. I'd thought that perhaps then, some of my own heartache would be quelled. It was not as simple as that however.

On one hand, hoping I was not their child, would ease the heartache of being abandoned so easily and it wouldn't sting so much. But that would force me to face the reality of never having been wanted by my own birth family. Either truth spoke of my own loss that would eventually crush my soul.

I slumped on my bed, my legs giving up for the umpteenth time today. It was time to leave. To face the dreaded truth. What had began as mere thoughts had placed me on a path to face my past once again.

Ever since I'd woken up in Gol's shack, my mother's and father's faces were not sights I had desired to gaze upon. Without a conscious effort on my part, I had decided I wished not to see them. But as always, fate found a way yet again to force me to do that which I did not wish to do.

Knowing everyone awaited my presence, I had meant to step out of my chambers, but my legs simply refused to work. The lump in my throat would not ease up either as fear clutched tightly to my insides. What would I say to them? Would greeting my own mother in any other way apart from the usual warm embrace feel different? Would I cry, would they? Would father call me by the name that only he used? What would they say to me? Would we talk at all?

Tears spilled as I realized that no matter what today brought, what their answer would be, that loving relationship we shared was long gone. Gone with the Shyla that had braved the waters of the Devil's river. Their bright light had been snuffed out while I was swallowed up down in the deep. And before I knew it, loud sobs escaped my mouth. Ugly tears accompanying the rips forming in my heart.

I did not care for who would be witness to the shedding of my sorrow. I simply cried. For how long, even I could not tell. It would take the faintest of knocks to draw my attention and make me realize that my sobbing had ceased.

“My lady... I hate to intrude but we do need to leave.” Astryn mumbled softly from behind my chamber’s doors and I knew I couldn’t stall any longer.

“Of course.” My voice was barely a whisper as I wiped at my face. Even when I knew it was futile to attempt to hide the evidence of my sorrow.

Another soft knock and I asked her to enter. I willed myself to get up before she did. My legs trembled, I couldn’t bring my hands to stop shaking and then I beheld him. Instead of Astryn, My mate slipped through the barely open doors. Standing in all his majestic glory and even though he bore a somewhat painful look on his face, his mere presence did something for my battered soul.

“You came?” I did not expect him to. At the very least, I had expected to be accompanied by Carlytte and the other maidens. Gol too, but not him.

“I couldn’t let you do this alone.” His hand came up to my face, but stopped shy of cupping my cheek. “If you’ll let me, I would be honoured to stand by your side.” He did not need to ask and I wondered what prompted him to. His eyes gave nothing away too. “Please.”

I nodded. “There is no one else I’d wish to have by my side.” That was the truth. Despite everything, his was the presence that was perfectly suited. If not for anything else, then for the bond that existed between us. I knew he could comfort me in ways no one could.

With no more words spoken, he held out his hand and once I slipped mine in, he led us out of my chambers.

His scent was everything I needed. The trembling in my legs faded with each step and every deep inhale of his wine scent. The soothing circular patterns he drew where his other hand rested on mine worked wonders too and by the time we stepped outside, I felt more of myself than the emotional wreck I had been in my chambers.

“We are riding?” Eyes wide, I stared at the royal carriage that was stationed outside the palace doors. “How big is the palace that we have to ride to see my parents?”

“It is because they do not reside in the palace.”

“They don’t?!” I couldn’t hide my surprise as I found his words extremely weird. They’d abandoned me, I could not argue with that, but Myrna? Why would they stay apart? “Why not?”

“It was your sister’s choice...their choice?” He shrugged his shoulders in the strangest manner. Or perhaps it was because I had not seen him so unsure of himself before. “I am not entirely sure whose choice it was.”

“Oh...” Deciding it was a question only my parents or Myrna could answer I dropped it and followed his lead towards the carriage.

“My lady.” Rakon nodded and I acknowledged his greeting with a well practiced nod, courtesy of Liira. I’d never noticed before, but with that I noted that the matriarch’s lessons were slowly becoming a part of me. Something I knew Liira would be proud of.

The ride was quiet with me sitting opposite my mate. I would have thought he preferred this type of sitting arrangement because he wished to watch me. I was wrong. His eyes were anywhere but on me. Probably his every focus was on whatever occupied his mind that he seemed to have gotten lost in. I was not complaining, however, as it gave me chance to watch him instead which was the perfect distraction from the nerves that were demanding for my attention the closer we drew to our destination.

The sight of him this close left me frowning. For a wolf, he seemed to have aged a century from the last time I saw him. He was burdened with something and I wished to ask how he was doing, but for whatever reason those words couldn’t leave my mouth. So I settled with guessing.

My mind thought back to everything I’d observed around the palace. The blood I’d smelled on him in the royal gallery. Even though he’d dismissed my concerns as nothing, the sight of him made me realize that it was far from nothing. Was it an enemy in the castle? A war or something close? When was the last time he’d slept?

“I’m sorry what?” His question jolted me from my thoughts. It turned out that I had spoken my thoughts aloud. I was about to deny what he’d heard but decided against it.

I straightened up. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Last nig-” He paused, mind seemingly searching. “I uh...two- no, three... Perhaps—”

“You have not slept at all?” I couldn’t help my scolding tone to which he only shrugged his shoulders.

“I have been busy.”

“Too busy to take care of yourself? What in God’s name is going on?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

I scoffed. “Doesn’t seem like it to me.” It was my turn to stare out of the carriage’s small window. If he did not care enough to share, I wouldn’t care either. Oh so I tried to convince myself. “Nothing!” I huffed under my breath barely moments after deciding I did not care.

“We are here.” The carriage stopped and dread instantly overtook me. But thanks to warm hands that covered mine just as quickly, I found my breath.

I looked up. “Thank you.”

“Come.” He stepped out first.

“Your majesty! Welcome.” My father’s happy tone pierced my broken heart. They were happy. Even in my absence they’d still remained happy. In a way I had known they’d gone ahead with their lives without me, but to see it for myself... Suddenly I was not so sure I wished to be here. Deep down I had hoped it was not true. That I had been mistaken, but as my parent’s scent assaulted my senses, my hope was shattered anew. It was as distinct as Myrna’s, but it meant nothing to me.

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 50 - Tips

“Come.” I held on tightly to Elian’s hand at his invitation, but made no attempt to move. The weight of what I was yet to discover was as shackles to my feet, keeping me from taking a single step. So was every thought as my mind lingered on my parent’s scents. Searching, still hoping, even for the tiniest thread to tug at my heart and speak of the bond that could have been. Nothing... One would even consider my heart as dead when it came to that. My usually expressive organ remained as still as Xatis’ afternoon air. Hot and

unwilling to be blown in any direction. It was a hopeless endeavour. One that left me with only one choice.

Taking in a much needed breath, I began my decent from the carriage.

“Your majesty, welcome to our humble home. My quee— Shyla?” Both my father and mother froze. Eyes as wide as saucers when their gazes settled on me. It was expected, but their utter surprise was as a knife to my heart. Had they settled to never ever seeing me again? Had they known about what Myrna had planned for me once they left me all alone in our tiny home? Had they ever gone back for me? Even out of curiosity?

Thoughts I had no business entertaining poured. With every ticking moment, they filled up my heart and broke it anew.

“Breathe, Shyla.” My mate’s gentle encouragement drew my attention to him, making me realize how tightly my grip on his hand had become. My breath was barely there. Everything in my chest was tight. Closed up and unwilling to let loose. I was drowning. While I stood there. It was as if I was back in the belly of the devil’s river. The weight of it kept pressing, banishing the little air I had left as I hang on to life.

“Breathe.” His tone was gentle, coaxing, but for the love of God I couldn’t just do it.

“Shyla?!” Not even the sudden panic in his tone could do it. “Damn it!” Warm hands cupped my cheeks as lips just as warm or warmer pressed to mine in a kiss that was desperate yet gentle, chaste yet life giving. Were kisses meant to do that?

When he pulled back, I gasped as everything loosened, letting in the life that every part of me was now desperate for. “I’m alright.” I breathlessly declared when his eyes searched mine.

“Are you certain?” His gentle touch drew me to the warmth of his hands. “If this is too much, we can—”

“No.” I shook my head. “There is no way I’m turning around. Not when I’m so close.” Those words turned out to be more for me than him. With him by my side, they were enough to give me the courage I needed to face them. “I’m ready.”

The king of Xatis studied me for a long moment before nodding. "Alright."

"Will you keep your king standing out here in the open?" Rakon's voice broke through the silence that surrounded us and I was grateful for the distraction.

"Of course not. Right this way, please." My father jumped before bowing at the head of the king's guard who invited us to follow after.

With their backs turned to me, I finally had the chance to look around. Having been shut in the carriage, I had no idea how far we'd come or where we were. But one thing was clear. Wherever my parent's new home was located, it wasn't a terrible neighborhood. Not at all. At the very least, they were in one of the closer districts to the capital. Home to many noble houses. Just not one of those belonging to the highest nobles in Xatis. Again, my question as to why they never stayed in the palace lingered.

Their little house was nothing close to our home in the forgotten village, but it was not the palace either. Definitely nowhere near what was fitting for the people who'd birthed the current queen.

There were guards littered everywhere, but I could not tell if those were meant for them or if their presence was on the account of the king.

"Please." My parents stood in the door way in invitation. Their heads bowed impossibly low, much to me as to the king of Xatis. The sight stirred more conflict in my heart. In a way it was difficult to see them submit in such a manner. My heart ached at the reasons for it.

"Please rise." The words escaped my lips without a second thought. It took me a moment to realize my mistake. "Forgive me." I turned to my mate. "I did not mean to—"

"It's alright." He dismissed me with a smile. "It is your right, never apologize for it." My parent's expressions were beyond surprised when I faced them again. I also knew that only the presence of my mate kept them from voicing the countless questions I saw swimming in their eyes.

"Thank you." I mumbled as I moved past them.

Once inside as one would expect, the best seat was offered to the king. He declined, inviting me to take his place instead. It was not proper to do this. I

could not just take his place, but more than that I couldn't decline his offer as easily as he'd done with my father.

He offered to take my cloak when he noted my reluctance. Again, I couldn't turn down that offer either. So I let him. When I sat down, he rested his hand on my shoulders in what was clearly a protective gesture. My father saw it, but only lowered his gaze without a word about it. My mother on the other hand seemed as one who'd just had an epiphany.

"You are with child?" Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears and what should have naturally been a happy occasion only left my heart aching.

"That is not the reason I'm here for, mother." I was not going to tread that path with her. Not today. Not ever. She'd given up that right.

"My moonlight—"

I tensed, teeth clenching of their own accord. "I do not think you have the right to call me that anymore!" Of all the things that could have come out of my mouth, that declaration was simply not it. Neither was the accompanying tone. Nor the anger that bubbled, replacing my sorrow.

My parents were caught off guard too. Clearly at a loss for words, they shifted uncomfortably as their gazes dropped to the floor. At least they had the decency to be ashamed. To what extent it went only the gods knew.

"Are you my parents? Am I truly your daughter?" I decided I did not wish to stay here longer than necessary.

"Why in God's name would you ask that?" Surprise. I'd known my parents long enough to know they were truly surprised by that. Of this I was confident.

Because you abandoned me without a second thought? I wished to say.

"Because I shifted, mother. And your wolves are as alien to me as any other."

"Alien? Why would our daughter's wolf— wait, what did you say?!" My mother's eyes darted to my father's before landing back on me. "You shifted? Are you sure?!"

"Shifting is no easy task mother, making it quite hard to mistake."

“But— No—” My mother shook her head, denial very evident in her expression. “You still have time. You should not even be able to carry a child yet. Not that I’m not happy, but moon goddess—” She shook her head some more. “This should not be happening. At least not for a while.” Her last words were aimed at my father. “She still has time...”

“That does not answer my question at all, mother.”

“But moonlight—”

“I suggest you think long and hard before you utter your next words.” I turned to my mate, surprised at his use of his alpha voice. The thought that that would be one of the reasons he’d accompanied me had not crossed my mind, until now.

“We have no reason to be untruthful, your majesty.” My father straightened up, oozing that usual pride I had once admired. “She is as much our daughter as your queen is.”

“This is what I had wished for right?” I banished the tears that sought to spill freely at my father’s declaration. How could he even be so free to say it after they’d left without so much as a good bye. Who did that to someone they swore to be their daughter?

“I remember the day I birthed her as clear as day.” My mother smiled. The splitting of her lips cut through me as sharp knives. I was familiar with this story. Knew it by heart. It had been told to me countless times. Melted my heart each time. My mother was about to narrate it. It would make the perfect answer to my question. I was not about to make myself endure it, however. Because this time my heart would not melt while she narrated.

“That won’t be necessary.” I stood without warning, heart heavy. “I have the answers I sought.”

“But— Are you leaving? So soon?” Desperation laced my mother’s tone.

“That will be all.” My mate shielded me from my mother’s outstretched arms, sending her bowing and retreating. I shouldn’t have felt relieved by that, but I did.

“May we attend the banquet at least?”

“You may. I couldn’t possibly keep you from celebrating the coming of this kingdom’s heir.” The choice of my words was deliberate. “You may do so... Just as any other inhabitant of Xatis.” It was by no means an invitation, but that was as close as they would ever be. And as I walked away, as the weight of that truth sank in, only the presence of my mate kept me up on my two feet.